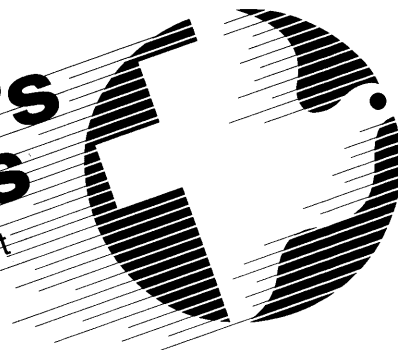


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# Women's Concerns

Report



## Women and ritual

Mennonites have often been afraid of ritual, though it has always been a standard element of worship in the Judeo-Christian faith. Like Micah, the prophet, we thought ritual was only vain burnt offerings and ten thousand rivers of oil. What we missed is that ritual does not stop there. It moves us to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. Times are changing. Ritual is no longer taboo. Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary even offers a class on celebrating rituals in worship.

Traditional church rituals have been of and for the spirit. The events on which they are based were real physical events—eating a meal or going into the river to have water poured on one's body. But the church has taken the body out and elevated the spirit so that we are hardly aware that it is our bodies that need the nourishment of communion and the cleansing of baptismal waters.



My masters thesis, "There's Power in the Blood: Women, Christian Ritual and the Blood Mysteries" addressed the bodies of women in a Christian context. In my interviews with women about their experiences with menarche, childbirth and menopause, I discovered that what has often been labeled mundane or even unclean by the church has been an opportunity for meeting the Holy for many women. One woman told me, "In many ways, I feel that the events themselves—the giving birth, the nursing, the diaper changing—are a form of sacrificial ritual.

As women, we are now claiming ritual in our lives. We are creating together what has been left out of our church experiences. We are finding again the importance of our own bodies, whether through the blood of menstruation or the touch of another. We are reclaiming our ties to that great body upon which we dwell, mother earth. We are encountering new ways to connect with the Holy One.

Ritual is integral to us. It is the daily rituals of our lives that keep us grounded and organized, that connect us to one another and keep us from isolation. In ritual we are changed, moved to another level of relationship with ourselves, others and the Divine.

This issue of the *Report* deals with ritual in our lives, as a special celebration and as a daily event. Stories of rituals are included as well as helps for creating our own rituals. May each of us be blessed as we try expanding our repertoire of music, prayers and events for celebration.

—compiled by Cynthia A. Lapp

Cynthia A. Lapp, Mt. Rainier, Md., lives with her partner and two children. She works for Hyattsville Mennonite Church and for WATER, Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual.

**"To light a candle is to evoke the heat and light of fire. To sing is to pass air through our throats, producing beauty. At a special event, there is almost always food taken from the earth. Water is part of everything—plants, food and human beings."**

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by Karla Kauffman

## Ritual in the earth

In March of this year, I moved into a small house in Cadillac, Michigan. Friends brought me potted hyacinths, a forsythia branch in a vase, a candle and food. As I think about how the earth's resources are part of our rituals, my friends' gifts come to mind. They are an example of how much we utilize the earth's abundance every day.

Lately, I've been studying the second creation story. This is the story of how God created humans from dust and breathed into us—the Hebrew *ha-adam* (the Human) from *adamah*, Earth. How amazing that our religious heritage teaches that we are from earth! From dust, even. Our heritage also teaches that air was breathed into us and made us live. We are earth creatures, according to this story. We are earth, we are water, we are air, and we are fire. (In fact, our bodies emit low voltage electricity.) Joni Mitchell and Carl Sagan remind us as well that we are stardust. This is not only true metaphorically, but also physically.

Ancient Western people believed everything was made from four basic elements—fire, air, earth and water. We have carried this tradition into our own time. For example, when we celebrate special events, we almost always use one or more of these elements. To light a candle is to evoke the heat and light of fire. To sing is to pass air through our throats, producing beauty. At a special event, there is almost always food taken from the earth. Water is part of everything—plants, food and human beings.

In the process of deciding to move to Michigan last summer, I had many small ritual moments, alone or with friends. The most memorable one, the one that helped set me free of my fears and immobility, was provided by a dear friend. She brought a yellow and red candle, strawberries, lemon juice and chocolate. We set up a table in the living room of my second-floor apartment in

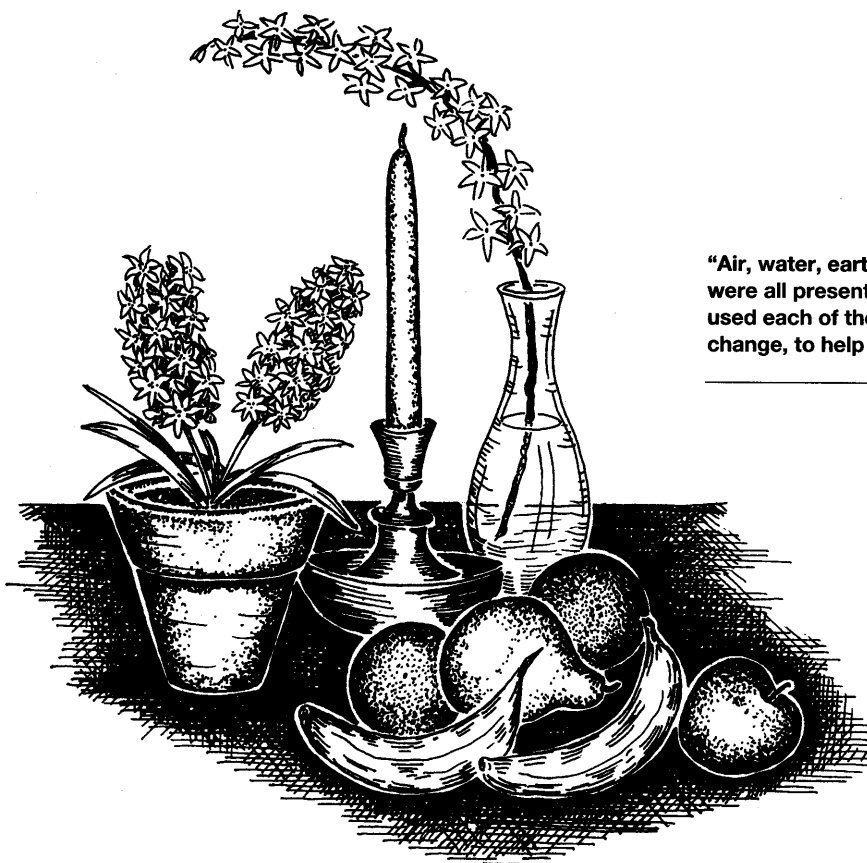
Denver—definitely not a pastoral outdoor setting, but the Earth doesn't need perfect settings to be effective. We lit the candles to kindle the flame of personal empowerment, to kindle the flame of strength. We sipped the lemon juice to recall the bitterness of life and to name some of it. We dipped the strawberries in chocolate to call us to the sweetness of life. My friend prayed over me and played a cassette of Jennifer Berezon's "She Carries Me."

Air, water, earth and fire were all present, and the Spirit used each of them to help me change, to help me move on. I sang "She Carries Me" at the last worship service I attended in Colorado, and I noticed that I felt ready to leave. I had said my goodbyes not only to individuals but also somehow to my time in Colorado.

This issue of *Report* focuses on how rituals help us mark important life events. Yet when I contemplate how I've utilized the earth, I realize I create rituals around the earth's cycles more than using the cycles to accommodate my life passages. I find I am moving toward living in earth's rhythms. For example, lately I am celebrating the solstices and equinoxes—those days that mark the changes in the seasons.

For the fall equinox last September, a group of about 10 women, men and children walked into the woods behind a mutual friend's home to a circle of logs around a fire pit. In the drizzly and chilly air of September 20, I played a flute and another woman drummed to call us together. One song I played was "Tis a Gift to be Simple." Each person then shared a reading or a reflection. One woman read from the Bible. Several read poetry. Food from the summer harvest was placed near the fire. One man went around behind us giving backrubs as we shared. Ahh! A five-year-old girl gave us kernels of corn as we walked around the fire.

We ended the ritual by standing together in a circle facing the fire, the light. Then we all turned a quarter turn with the light to our left side and the dark to our right side. Next we turned to face the dark night, the six months of darkness we were entering. Then another turn, and we had half light again. We ended facing the light of the fire in the center and were reminded that we need the quietness of the dark as well as the activity of the light.



"Air, water, earth and fire  
were all present, and the Spirit  
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change, to help me move on."

Through the years, the rituals I've found most effective have been created by individuals within the gathering as we've attended to what the earth is waiting to teach. We often receive unexpected insights when we listen in ritual time. As I practice such earth-conscious ritual, I find the following elements are essential for me:

- *Humility*: The awareness that we are humus, that we are humble and of the earth, that we are *ha-adam* and *adamah*.
- *The four elements in some form or another*: fire, air, earth and water.
- *Activity harmonious with the weather*: Friends of mine got married in a church just after a storm put out the electricity. No lights and no organ were available. The bride walked up the aisle to a hastily-arranged congregational singing of a favorite hymn. The couple now says they could not imagine a better way to have the processional.
- *Use of recyclable items*: Let's follow Brother Lawrence's humility and find joy in washing those dishes!
- *No set clock time to end*: The best rituals end when participants know "It is finished."
- *Generosity*: The Creator is immensely generous through the Earth. We can trust that enough will be provided, and when we take that risk, it is provided.

A few fine ways for ending sacred time together include joining hands and humming in unison with one person beginning a note, bowing deeply in silence to each other or using a verbal blessing. A favorite blessing of mine is this one from Miriam Therese Winter's *Woman Prayer Woman Song*:

May the blessing of God go before you.

May her grace and peace abound.

May her Spirit live within you.

May her love wrap you 'round.

May her blessing remain with you always.

May you walk on holy ground.

**Karla Kauffman lives an hour from Lake Michigan in Michigan's lower peninsula. She grew up on an Ohio farm and lived in Indiana, Washington, D.C., and Colorado for several years. She currently manages a bookstore and facilitates dream work groups. Karla is incubating her seminary and counseling training in the hope they will develop into an ecologically-focused spiritual direction practice.**

**"Rituals are the observances  
of life, and milestones are the  
turning points."**

by Silena Davis

## Ritual in the everyday

All aspects of life are ritual, ceremony and observance. The miracle of birth is a ritual. Mothers bathing, feeding and playing with their children are ritual. As we grow up, going to school and working become rituals. We reach milestones as a result of the rituals in our lives.

In my life, rituals and milestones are closely related. Rituals are the observances of life, and milestones are the turning points. To begin, I will address birth because it is the backdrop for the unfolding of our lives. Then I will proceed with an evolving of the self with all its rituals, its observances and milestones, as well as the places where rituals have been interrupted. I will share reflections on my work in the church and in theater. I will address different events such as discrimination, the loss of jobs, and the loss of my mother because each of these events interrupted my daily rituals.

I was born on October 27, 1963, in Houghton, a small college town in upstate New York. I am African American and was born to two well-educated African Americans who were raised in the Carolinas. They spent most of their religious lives in the Baptist Church. My mother was diabetic, and it took my parents a long time to bring a child to full term. I have a brother who is 12 years older than I. There were three miscarriages before I, their long-awaited baby, finally came. I was born 11 pounds and 10 ounces.

There are many perspectives on birth. Most certainly, it is a milestone for the person who is created. I also consider it a milestone for the people doing the creating. I consider myself an extension of my parents, and I carry their rich legacy. Furthermore, I consider the survival of childhood as my first milestone.

Reflecting on my childhood, we were neither rich nor poor. Living in the North, we were neither oppressed nor repressed. My father pursued his Ph.D. in oral interpretation, and my mother worked as a cook for the colleges

that my father attended. I basked in the calm of growing up with educated and involved parents who wanted me to have a good life, to be productive and to know where I came from. We developed rituals as a family such as going out for ice cream, shopping, going to cultural events, watching Wide World of Sports on Saturdays, and listening to the radio on Sunday afternoons. (We were not allowed to watch television on Sundays.)

During my formative years, we lived in a predominantly white neighborhood, and I attended predominantly white schools. The rituals of playing and pretending can be the foundation for what a child experiences as trust in her surroundings. When those rituals are interrupted, then the child's trust may also be disturbed.



**"I realized that one doesn't need to chant or burn candles in order to do a ritual. Our day-to-day lives and the activities within them are ritualistic and thus sacred."**

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I remember when I was about seven or eight, I was playing with other children on the school grounds. A little white boy called me "nigger." I was upset because it made me feel different from everybody else. It was my first understanding of hatred. After that, everything changed. I became wary of those who might hate me and want to hurt me. Much later in life, my father told me that not everyone will like me, and that I should not assume people will accept me. But my ritual of playing had already been interrupted.

Throughout my life, understanding hatred has been an ongoing struggle. I understand that the White community is very different from the African American community, but I do not understand why we hate each other. These happenings always startle me and make me wary of humankind. I cannot change the color of my skin or my cultural understandings. Yet there are people who do not even want my race or culture to exist.

Another discriminatory interruption of my everyday rituals happened when I was in college. A friend and her parents invited me to dinner during Parents' Weekend. The subject of dating came up. I mentioned that I dated guys of all races, including white guys. There was silence. Then my friend's father said he knew of an interracial couple who got married. The guy, he commented, went insane. And unfortunately, my friend's father didn't stop. He went on to say, "As the Bible says, 'Do not be unequally yoked.'" I finished the verse for him, saying, "...with unbelievers." This unexpected incidence of racism was awkward and embarrassing, especially for my friend. She apologized after dinner.

In spite of such interruptions, I survived my childhood and young adult years. I was pretty normal, full of imagination and creativity with a spirit of adventure. I was also sheltered, but I got over this rather quickly as I read and heard about the world and its peoples.

The church played an important part in the construction of my thinking. Between the ages of three and 12, I was very involved in a Wesleyan church. Then from ages 12 to 18, I became involved in a Brethren in Christ church where I took leadership positions with the youth group, the Bible quiz team and the Youth Leadership Task Force.

However, not until I became involved in the Mennonite Church and attended Eastern Mennonite College [now Eastern Mennonite University] did I really begin to take religion and spirituality seriously. I was affected spiritually by the Mennonite community with its rituals, its service-oriented nature and its vision of God in our lives. I was also affected intellectually by its history and stance on peace issues. My subsequent involvement with Mennonites has led to the formation of my adult self which I consider one of the most important milestones in my life.

Going to Strasbourg, France, with Brethren Colleges Abroad during my junior year at EMC was the beginning of my gravitation toward adulthood. I changed my major from Home Economics to French Education which I now know was symbolic of this movement away from my inward self to becoming a more active participant in life, both locally and globally.

My work study job at EMC was in the college theater where I did the lighting and sound for more than 10 productions. Watching the birth of a play is ritualistic in and of itself. I watched characters develop and take on personalities. I analyzed each play—*Whose Life is it Anyway?*, *Our Town*, *Godspell*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Zoo Story*, *Quilters*, and more. I lived through the various characters, felt for their most complicated human conditions and consequently learned about myself as I reacted to their dilemmas. Each play's development was a birth of the human spirit and therefore a ritual for all those involved. I realized that one doesn't need to chant or burn candles in order to do a ritual. Our day-to-day lives and the activities within them are ritualistic and thus sacred.

After graduating from college, I moved to Washington, D.C. My mother had just died. I found myself floundering with life in general, but more specifically with relationships among my family, my friends and my career. I had mini-explosions in my head. There were bursts of confusion mixed with trips to strange intellectual and emotional places. I experienced a personal emotional breakdown. In this breakdown, my rituals of reading and participating in church, the things that were a source of enrichment for me, also disintegrated.

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**"I learned that ignoring even these smallest of rituals may cause us to miss important life activities and rhythms."**

**"I wanted it to be a ritual where she was blessed by God, family and friends in a special way. I wanted her to see and feel the strength that can come from having women friends. I wanted her to know that as a young woman, she is made in the image of God."**

Several times, I actually caught myself looking to alcohol for comfort from the dark feelings that depression brought. I kept wondering how to get back on track in the midst of all the havoc. These confusing feelings prevailed for several years. Then I started thinking creatively about how to deal with the issues around my feelings.

I realized the lack of ritual was particularly damaging to me. Some days I would get up and not even take a shower, which is a wonderful and refreshing ritual. I learned that ignoring even these smallest of rituals may cause us to miss important life activities and rhythms.

Another major milestone in my life came during the winter of 1993. I was without a job and living in temporary housing and was beside myself with anxiety most days. I had no money. For weeks, my only income was the money I got from shoveling sidewalks.

Then I decided to give a poetry reading and invited all my friends over. They listened to me read the words I had written. We reveled in food and conversation as my friends shared their reactions to my work.

These were poems of release and poems filled with the passions I was reaching for. In spite of my situation, I found I could celebrate, share and be creative. This moment was a real mark in my life, a ritual symbolizing my freedom of thought and expression. By expressing my thoughts on life, I was also choosing life as opposed to death. In spite of being African American in a world where Whites are privileged; in spite of financial and career problems; and even in spite of not being able to unearth my own identity, I had decided to carry on. I would do more than survive. I would move and live. Life, I decided, was bigger than all of my problems.

**Silena R. Davis lives in Arlington, Va., and is a program assistant of international graduate programs at The George Washington University Law School. She is currently studying to become a publications specialist.**

**by Jan Springer Rheinheimer**

## **Rite of passage ritual**

My daughter Lindsay is 16 and driving. It's hard to believe that it's been three years since we celebrated her Rite of Passage—turning 13 and starting her period. I wanted to make this passage into young womanhood more than just another birthday party with friends—more than gifts, cake and ice cream. I wanted it to be a ritual where she was blessed by God, family and friends in a special way. I wanted her to see and feel the strength that can come from having women friends. I wanted her to know that as a young woman, she is made in the image of God.

The big question was how to do this. Although I remembered reading bits and pieces about the role of ritual for young girls in some other cultures, I had never been part of any such rituals. I wanted Lindsay to feel affirmed but not embarrassed. So I started to plan.

Lindsay and I talked about some of the things we wanted to have as part of this celebration, but I also wanted to include some surprises. We invited several different groups to the celebration—the girls in her Sunday school class with their mothers, my women's group, her grandmothers, several aunts, Lindsay's church mentor, and a few other friends with whom she had a close relationship. I asked each person to bring a blessing and to be prepared to name a gift they believed God had blessed Lindsay with. I knew her grandmothers and aunts wouldn't be able to come, but sent the invitations early enough so they could respond by letter. I wanted Lindsay to recognize that she was part of a lineage of valued and strong women, women who loved her and desired God's best for her.

The day came for the celebration. Lindsay and I were a little nervous. How would this go? What would people think?

I set the chairs in a circle. In the center stood a table with a "well" holding water, flowers, a Christ candle, oil for anointing, and candles to symbolize God, Lindsay, and



her friends. We chose a white candle for God and green candles for growth and maturity. Because purple is Lindsay's favorite color, we chose purple candles for empowerment

The service included songs about the feminine image of God ("God Who Gardens," by Martha Ann Kirk and Colleen Fulmer), a time for friends to offer blessings and affirm Lindsay's God-given gifts, and a time for reading letters sent by grandmothers and aunts. Lindsay's friends used candles to signify how they are lit by God and how their light touches and is touched by Lindsay.

During the time of blessing, I invited each woman or mother and daughter to come forward and light a candle. As they did this, they offered Lindsay her "God-given gift" and gave their blessings by dipping their fingers in

**"Lindsay remembers, 'The day was really special. I liked getting the blessings from people. It showed me how blessed I am to have these people in my life. I was really glad we did this.'"**

the well and touching her forehead or hand. After everyone present had blessed Lindsay, we took turns reading the blessings from those unable to attend. It was powerful for me to watch my daughter being blessed by her girlfriends and by other women.

I blessed Lindsay with water and anointed her with oil for healing of past hurts by others and by me. We sang several songs about God's love, care, strength and support. Lindsay then opened the gifts that people brought or sent. We closed the ritual with a song of blessing and a simple dance ("Blessing Song" by Miriam Therese Winter).

After the service, Lindsay and her girlfriends went out to play while the women helped prepare refreshments. It was a time for both age groups present to relax and talk about the ritual. Looking back, Lindsay remembers, "The day was really special. I liked getting the blessings from people. It showed me how blessed I am to have these people in my life. I was really glad we did this. It was a unique way of celebrating my 13th birthday." I realized later how important the written messages were to her as I watched her reread them.

Because the Mennonite Church has not typically been a "ritual" church (although we have rituals in our own way), these kinds of events may sometimes feel uncomfortable to Mennonites. Perhaps we want to do them, but our lack of experience and knowledge make it difficult. I think rituals are slowly coming back into the church, and I look for nonthreatening ways to offer them in my local congregation.

Celebrating this rite of passage with Lindsay in this way was a valuable experience for me, and I hope it will become more valuable to Lindsay as she grows older. I trust the blessings she received as well as hearing what others saw as her gifts will provide encouragement and strength for her journey.

**Jan Springer Rheinheimer, Monument, Colo. is a spiritual director and co-pastor with her husband, Don. She has two children, Lindsay, age 16, and Ben, age 20.**

**"Do you know any women who call work and explain they are taking off the week because they need time to relax and reflect on their menstrual periods?"**

by Jennifer Ulrich

## Menarche rituals: Celebration for the journey ahead

Rituals often mark the passage from childhood into adulthood. Jewish girls and boys participate in bat mitzvah and bar mitzvah, a ceremony which ushers them into religious adulthood. In my congregation, Community Mennonite Church, we mark several milestone in the lives of our children; beginning school, learning to read, the 12th birthday and that all important point at age 16 when they truly enter American adulthood and get their driver's license. As the group of sixteen-year-olds stand before the congregation, they and their parents each recognize the rights and responsibilities which go with a driver's license. A blessing and a prayer are shared and each new driver receives a key chain with 35 cents just in case they need to call home.

Traditionally girls come of age at the onset of their first menstrual cycle (menarche). This passage is marked by rituals and ceremonies. The message from these rituals is mixed. In some cultures the flow of menstrual blood makes a woman/girl unclean, and she is kept away from everyone during this time. Other cultures see strength and power in a woman's cycle and choose to celebrate and honor women/girls during this time.

In the Ituri Forest, a rain forest in the central African country of Congo, two neighboring groups of Pygmies epitomize the different thinking about menarche. The girls in one group are secluded for a month in an effort to hide the fact they have come of age. A girl's first menstrual cycle is seen as shameful and an embarrassment. The other group has no such fears and the news of a girl's first menses is told to everyone. She goes into seclusion to be told lore and songs of the village. She learns from older women what it means to be a woman and a member of the community (Cummins, 1981).

How we respond to our menstrual cycles and how the media advertises menstrual products sends a clear message about our views of this aspect of womanhood. In North America the message is clear, this is a private affair, one we are to keep to ourselves. We close bathroom doors. Male relatives won't buy menstrual products (even if their life depended on it) (Grosser, 1998). The goal is to make sure no one knows it is "that time of the month." Menstrual products are sold on their ability to keep one free from "accidents" and being invisible to all others, even to the woman who is using them. In part we want it to be this way, we don't want to be treated differently because we happen to discharge blood once a month. But have we done ourselves a disservice by not recognizing this rite of passage in our lives?

Some women are finding ways to celebrate this time with their daughters, honoring them and giving them gifts which will help them through the teen years as they move into adult life. Rituals such as the one Jan Springer Rheinheimer held for her daughter Lindsay, as described in this issue, are becoming more frequent. A study published in *Health Care for Women International*, found that about 30 percent of the young college women from four different countries had marked their menarche in some way. For the American students most of the celebrations were private, family dinners or lunches out with mom. Sometimes a father would give a daughter flowers or congratulatory words (Chrisler, 1998).

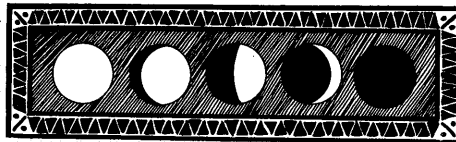
Ann Short and Helynna Brooke, along with their daughters, have put together a kit for a ceremony complete with instructions and the instruments needed for a ritual. *First Moon: Passage to Womanhood* can be used either at the time of menarche or anytime during a girl's teen years. Short and Brooke see the need for this ritual to help young women enter adulthood by connecting them with their mothers and other women who can help them navigate life's journey.

As girls enter into this new segment of their lives they need assurance that they will define who they become as women. Rituals which encourage this self definition and connect them to older women who can help them on their journey, are a good way to celebrate this time. These cere-

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"I always feel a bit more relaxed when I think of all the hundreds of thousands of women, some of them thousands of miles away from me, all doing [a similar] thing at exactly the same moment in time."



BY BETH GRAYBILL

## When Auntie Flow visits will you invite her in?

One of the more interesting initiatives related to menses rituals is Menstrual Monday, a world-wide holiday celebrating menstruation. (See their web site at <http://www.menstrualmonday.org>) Some of the goals of Menstrual Monday, according to their poster, are "to create a sense of fun around menstruation; to encourage women to take charge of their menstrual and reproductive health; [and] to create greater visibility about menstruation in the media." Menstrual Monday organizers encourage the following commemorations: "Wear a red article of clothing; put a red tablecloth on the table at dinner; talk to an older or younger relative about her menstrual experiences; create some art or do some writing about menstruation; and share with others; share information about PMS, self-breast examination, or menopause; create a ritual involving red candles and carnations."

In part, Menstrual Monday hopes to help overcome the isolation usually associated with menstruation for Western women. Geneva Kachman, one of the website organizers, writes, "The international aspect of Menstrual Monday is crucial, as we women are bleeding all over this planet (literally). Even now when I get my period, the bathroom can start to feel like an isolation chamber, like I'm the only one getting the adhesive on a pad all stuck together because I'm in such a hurry; someone else may feel she's the only one . . . rinsing out a reusable pad; another woman may feel she's the only one noticing her periods aren't as long as they used to be. I always feel a bit more relaxed when I think of all the hundreds of thousands of women, some

of them thousands of miles away from me, all doing [a similar] thing at exactly the same moment in time."

In response to our request for menses rituals, Kachman sent the following suggestions:

- Keep a monthly planner/menstrual planner. There is the workday, the workweek, but what about the "workmonth?" When I get my period I like to set aside a bit of time to review what I accomplished in the previous month, what the problem areas were, what the new opportunities were, and then set some goals for the month to come, the next 28 days or so of my menstrual cycle. It might be nice to buy a small notebook just for this purpose.
- Pick or buy flowers that haven't opened yet. As your period begins to "blossom," the flowers in your vase are blossoming as well.
- Make yourself a "menstrual spot" in a garden or window box. Plant red flowers, or maybe even some cool blue flowers, if you experience your period as hot and uncomfortable.
- Pick out biblical passages or Psalms that seem appropriate to menstruation. If you are in pain because of cramps, or angry because of PMS, or tired or fatigued at that time of the month, a little notebook directing you to appropriate passages in the Bible may be a comfort. This could evolve into a support group where women get together and share their menstrual/premenstrual/menopausal struggles.

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"We don't want to be treated differently because we happen to discharge blood once a month. But have we done ourselves a disservice by not recognizing this right of passage in our lives?"

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- If you feel negative about your periods, pick an activity you like to do, and then **ONLY** do it when you have your period. I love to visit greenhouses, so I try to go when I have my period because I find it relaxing to walk the aisles and admire plants. You may picnic at the park, or go to a concert or movie, or save a certain book to read or a favorite dish to eat **ONLY** at that time of the month; it gives you something to look forward to!
- Try drawing a picture of "Auntie Flow" or writing a story about "your friend coming to visit." This could be humorous, but it could also be serious and respectful, as well. In the same vein, try rewriting nursery rhymes or song lyrics to talk about menstruation. Here's an example:

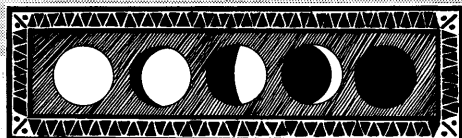
Mary, Mary, quite contrary,

how does your period flow?

With sleepless nights and painful cramps,  
sweet dreams and all quiet below?

Our thanks to Kachman for these ideas. She may be reached at 4881 Packard #A2, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48108 or [menstrullenium@aol.com](mailto:menstrullenium@aol.com). How we respond to our menstrual cycles says a lot about our understanding of the female experience. These ideas are designed to send positive messages.

Beth Graybill is director of MCC U.S. Women's Concerns Office.



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monies focus not so much on the biological function but rather on ways we can usher girls into a new community where there are people ready to help them walk the well traveled path of womanhood.

## Resources of Interest

To purchase *First Moon: Passage to Womanhood* contact The Brooke Company at 1342-38th Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94122 USA; 1-888-965-4812 (in the US) or (415)731-1818; [brooke@celebrategirls.com](mailto:brooke@celebrategirls.com); [www.celebrategirls.com](http://www.celebrategirls.com)

The Museum of Menstruation & Women's Health available on the web at [www.mum.org](http://www.mum.org). This site is intended to be a repository for information about menstruation. It

includes historical information on menstrual products, ads and booklets about menstruation, among other things. It has received a Britannica Internet Guide Award, a Top 5% Lycos award and Best of the Net May 1999 award. There's a lot of interesting material, both fun and informative.

Judy Blume's classic book, *Are You There God, It's Me Margaret* (1970), tells the story of a sixth-grade girl's struggles growing up, including the onset of her menstrual cycle.

Anita Diamant's book, *The Red Tent* (St. Martin's Press, 1997), is the story of Dinah, Leah's only daughter and what she learns from her four mothers (Jacob's wives, Rachel, Leah, Zilpah and Bilhah) when they spend time the Red Tent (the place women visit to give birth or have their monthly periods).

"We the feeble, the business-suited, Birkenstock and baby-stroller crowd had all gathered for an age-old ritual—feeling the gentle swipe of soft black ashes touch our foreheads. We gathered to whisper words of confession and hear words of reassurance and forgiveness."

*Lifecycles V. 1: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones* edited by Debra Orenstein and published by Jewish Lights Publications, 1998. Rabbi Orenstein has compiled rituals, liturgies and prayers for the life stages of Jewish women.

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Jennifer Ulrich served as intern to the Women's Concerns office in June and July 2000. She is currently working on a master's degree in applied women's studies at Claremont Graduate University and is catalog librarian at Eastern Mennonite University. She is a member of Community Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Va.

by Anita Amstutz

## Embodying our life transitions through ritual

How odd. How familiar. I found myself, a Mennonite woman, sitting in a big Catholic elementary school gymnasium for Ash Wednesday among Catholic brothers and sisters, listening to one Sister's words about penitence and forgiveness. The church sanctuary was being remodeled, so here we were, over one hundred persons, taking time from our busy daily routine. We the feeble, the business-suited, Birkenstock and baby-stroller crowd had all gathered for an age-old ritual—feeling the gentle swipe of soft black ashes touch our foreheads. We had gathered to whisper words of confession and hear words of reassurance and forgiveness.

What was more odd than sitting among Catholics to observe Ash Wednesday was that I was sitting with Catholics in Wayne County, Ohio—the place where I was born and raised, the place I left 17 years ago. Now, freshly returned from California, where I had recently finished a graduate degree in theology, I was living in the Midwest. My body grieved the loss of friends, diversity, the expansive land of the West, and the spiritual home I had found there. As I partook of this symbolic beginning of the Lenten season, feeling the ashes on my skin, I somehow felt comforted and at peace. Unexpectedly, I sensed tears slipping down my cheeks.

I had not learned this ritual growing up in Wayne County's Mennonite community, but I had come to appreciate and observe Ash Wednesday and Lent regularly while living in large urban areas during my 17 years away. I felt as Jesus must have felt in the wilderness during the 40 days we call Lent—somewhat abandoned, alone, afraid, uncertain of what might come next—but my body was comforted by the familiarity of experiencing this ritual. I felt at home in the midst of strangers.

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**"I felt as Jesus must have felt in the wilderness during the 40 days we call Lent—somewhat abandoned, alone, afraid, uncertain of what might come next—but my body was comforted by the familiarity of experiencing this ritual."**

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We as human beings, as human bodies, as spirits with bodies, desperately need rituals that include and welcome the whole body into our congregational worship life. I have powerful memories associated with rituals that included the whole body. They are reborn again and again in every cell of my body as I partake.

Church rituals such as footwashing and communion root me and carry me. They make me feel beloved, a part of the community. The body loves that which is familiar. It thrives and is comforted. When the body feels safe, then the heart splits open without fear. It's in those times when our deepest capacity as humans to feel and to love is realized.

We also need embodied rituals to mark more than just the church calendar. We need rituals to mark and honor transitions and events in our daily human lives, seeing them as sacred events. These rituals become like beacons, guiding us through the often chaotic and unpredictable ups and downs of our lives. They connect us to each other in time and space, helping us deal with the overwhelming mystery of our existence and live joyfully in the face of suffering, our powerful emotions and the unexpected turns our lives often take.

I remember a women's dream group I was part of for five years during my seminary days on the West Coast. We called ourselves the dreamgirls. Interpreting our dreams together was powerful and revelatory. Even more carefully stored in my body, like a computer memory chip, are the life rituals we did together, honoring our comings and goings, the ebbs and flows of our lives and the emotions

released through our bodies at these times. Job changes, death, the end of relationships, anger, the death and birth of dreams, celebrations, completions, you name it, we created rituals for all of these events. We took any excuse to come together and feast, sing, scream, cry, read poetry, share our hearts, burn candles and pray together.

Much of our last year together was about saying goodbye, about helping our bodies release their hold on the patterns and rhythms we had carved out in our busy urban lives to be with one another. Our bodies had learned to look forward to the familiar voices, dear faces and touch of friends.

I especially remember the evening we met in the golden California hills to say goodbye to Suzanne as she prepared to take a pastorate in the Midwest. We huddled together at the bottom of the echoing canyon walls with the sweet evening air of sage in our nostrils. The dying sun fired the sky with pinks, oranges, golds and reds. The shadows grew as we shared stories and poetry from our lives, sang songs, danced in a circle and blessed Suzanne to go on her way with our laughter and tears. Finally, we broke open a pomegranate and passed it around—the red, sticky, sweet innards dripping down our faces. The evening ended by leaving the dark hills behind for Roxanne's warm apartment where we cooked shrimp and toasted Suzanne's new adventure. Before we separated into the cool, foggy night we put our friend in the middle of our circle and four pairs of hands gently massaged and blessed her hands, feet and face.

**May you find a way to create  
simple (or elaborate!) rituals  
for those hard transitions,  
those powerful emotions,  
those celebrations in your life.**

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This was a sacred event. It was created in the midst of our daily lives, schedules, deadlines and stresses—the world of fleshy existence. It was not a carefully planned ritual in a church, yet it invited and nourished each of our bodies and spirits deeply. It was a bridge from one thing to the next.

Creating rituals that our bodies can share with others help define us. They help us know who we are, where we belong and what we love. Intentional life rituals, whether in our communities of faith or with a small group of trusted persons, connect us more deeply and authentically with ourselves, others and all of created life. They connect us to God as the one who lived among us and understands our humanity. They release our aching, longing emotions which all too often we hold inside, bottle up and repress in our carefully scripted lives amid the so-called civility of work, school, worship and social appointments.

May this be a call to gather those you love around you. May you find a way to create simple (or elaborate!) rituals for those hard transitions, those powerful emotions, those celebrations in your life. Ritual eases and honors our earthly journey in our dynamic and sensually alive bodies, which are a gift from God.

**Anita Amstutz currently lives in the Midwest. She recently completed graduate work in ministry/theology and the arts at Pacific School of Religion in northern California. She has an ongoing passion for the integration and healing of the mind, body and spirit.**

  
by Jane Ramseyer Miller

## Music for ritual

I began participating in worship-centered rituals when I was living with an intentional community of young adults in Mennonite Voluntary Service. In a very full household of eight, we decided to double up on bedrooms in order to designate one especially sunny room as our “worship space.” Our household met 2–3 times a week in silence, in song, and sometimes with clay, crayons or paper. I discovered an entirely new way to create a space for centering in my busy life and to experience the Divine through motion, music and texture.

For me, words often get in the way of meditation. Perhaps this comes from having grown up in a Mennonite congregation that was predominantly centered in academia. While I enjoy theological input and discussion, ritual-centered worship is the place where I more clearly experience a sense of the Divine and a connection to the community around me.

As a musician, music has always played a central role in weaving together the elements of ritual. In my late twenties, I traveled to France to experience the music and people of the community of Taize. I remember walking into the worship space on a cold, rainy afternoon. I hadn’t packed enough warm clothes for European spring weather, and I was chilled to the bone. Inside the door, I nearly burst into tears at the warmth, at the complete feeling of being held. The worship space was dimly lit by the light from hundreds of candles. Incense filled the room, and I stood transformed in an enveloping cacophony of voices singing the chants of Taize in a dozen languages.

Not all music works well for ritual worship. However, the chants of Taize work because they are simple and short enough for participants to learn them quickly. Rather than concentrating on text or complicated phrases, singers are able to let go and allow the music to become a soothing mantra. Keeping the music simple also allows the participant to be free from paper, free from using one’s eyes, and free to move or to sit quietly without distraction.

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**"The worship space was dimly lit by the light of hundreds of candles. Incense filled the room, and I stood transformed in an enveloping cacophony of voices singing the chants of Taize in a dozen languages."**

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Another reason the Taize worship setting works so well in ritual is that, while each piece of music and liturgy is carefully planned, the worship has the feeling of being completely spontaneous. A cantor begins and ends each piece without any verbal announcement. References for songs are listed for new participants, but the worship moves from music to words to silence without interruption.

One of the problems in selecting music for rituals is that most of the music published today is still narrowly focused in terms of the images and gender used in reference to the Divine. Some songbooks have attempted to work at inclusivity by using images for the Divine that avoid gender. If done creatively, this option can open up some new and progressive ways to experience the Divine. More often, I believe neutered gender limits our expression and experience of the Spirit. Especially in ritual, I look for music that embraces a wide variety of images, genders, religions and languages. I try to include music that embraces traditional texts as well as contemporary poetry—words that speak more directly to the experience of 21st century Christians. I look for language that stretches our image of justice. I am also careful not to bombard a ritual setting with too many diverse images. Keeping the images and ideas simple allows the participants to center and meditate in a setting that is not complicated or heady.

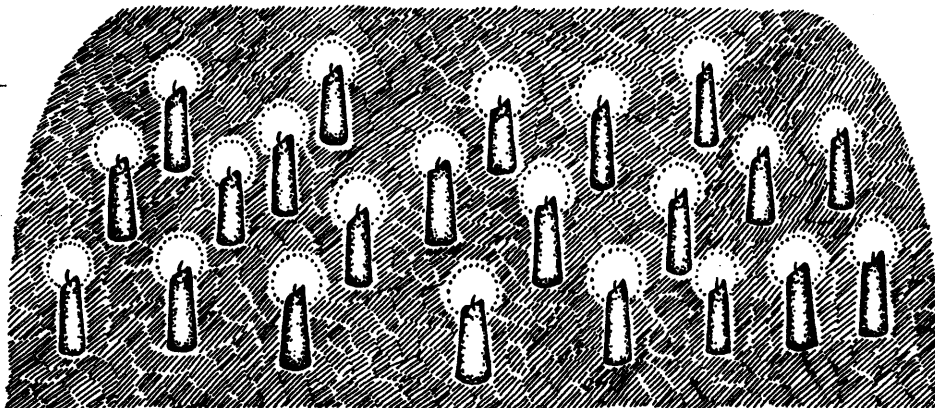
There are many written resources that can assist in choosing and leading music for ritual. Several Taize songbooks are available in a six-by-eight format which makes them portable as well as affordable for a small group. The multiple languages offered for these songs are invaluable. Most of the texts in these books are quite traditional.

Two other books that are conveniently small in size come from the Wild Goose Worship Group of Iona, a Christian community in Glasgow, Scotland. In *Come All You People*, the four-eight bar refrains are settings of traditional

Christian texts divided into sections representing the liturgical process—gathering, praise, confession, acclamation, concern, gratitude, leaving and communion. *There is One Among Us* is similar in format, but these songs were selected from cultures across the globe. Both books offer excellent background on each song as well as helpful suggestions for leading and teaching songs in the worship setting.

Fortunately, there are a number of published songbooks that do incorporate a wider variety of spiritual images and specifically incorporate images of the feminine Divine. Sister Miriam Therese Winter's *Woman Prayer, Woman Song* which was published nearly 15 years ago offers a combination of both ritual text and short musical refrains. The book is divided into three sections—Creation Rituals, Liberation Rituals and Transformation Rituals—and it contains simple settings of songs to accompany each ritual.

More recently, Pilgrim Press published *Bring the Feast*, a collection of songs with a focus on the feminine Divine by composers and poets most of whom are women. Most of the songs were specifically written for ritual settings or to mark an event of transition. The front of the book contains paragraph descriptions of each song, often describing the event or ritual that inspired its creation. *Bring the Feast* is also one of the few songbooks to offer songs which are inclusive of gay and lesbian Christians. Most of the artists have given permission for their songs to be copied for one-time use in a worship setting. This makes it possible to try out several songs before purchasing copies for ongoing use.



**"Finally, one of the best ways  
to discover songs for ritual  
use is to create your own."**

---

Ruth Duck has published numerous songbooks containing wonderfully inclusive and diverse hymns and prayers. The songs in her *Circles of Care* are ordered to correspond with the Christian church year, sacraments and rites, and the healing mission of the church. While the poetry is excellent, the hymns are quite text intensive. Asking a small group or individual to prepare a more difficult song is one way to work around that dilemma.

Two excellent denominational hymnals are *The New Century Hymnal*, compiled by the United Church of Christ, and *Voices United*, the hymnal and worship book for the United Church of Canada. Both of these collections contain songs with refreshingly bold and inclusive contemporary poetry. The language reflects issues and situations that are common to 21st century experience and spiritual struggles. Both also offer nearly 150 settings of the Psalms which are perfect for ritual use. Each psalm is written in inclusive, often first-person language, and is meant to be read aloud. A brief musical refrain introduces the psalm and is echoed as a sung response throughout the reading.

A more folk-centered book with simple, repetitive selections is *Rise Up Singing*, which contains contemporary and traditional songs with everyday themes arranged by topic. *Rounds Galore* is a collection of 340 rounds on nearly 340 different topics from secular to sacred. Rounds, as well as other songs, can easily be taught just before a ritual begins. The leader can then sing out a phrase within the ritual, and the community will join in spontaneously.

Finally, one of the best ways to discover songs for ritual use is to create your own. You can add a melody to the quotes and reflections of contemporary poets or to the writings of mystics such as Hildegard von Bingen, Julian of Norwich or Rumi. Writings from Buddhist, Islamic or other world religions also have much to offer Christian worship. Adding a simple tune to a repetitive phrase can be profoundly meaningful in a ritual setting. You can hum, whistle or improvise a tune without words. The key to ritual music is finding a sense of focus apart from everyday life. Music is prayer beyond words.

Jane Ramseyer Miller and her partner are members at the St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship in St. Paul, Minn. In addition to composing and arranging music, Jane works as music director for Calliope Women's Chorus and One Voice Mixed Chorus. She was one of four editors for the songbook *Bring the Feast*.

## **Musical Resources**

*Bring the Feast: Songs from the Re-Imagining Community*. Pilgrim Press. Cleveland, OH. pilgrim@ucc.org.

*Circles of Care*. Ruth Duck. Pilgrim Press. Cleveland, OH. pilgrim@ucc.org.

*Come All You People* and *There is One Among Us*. Compiled by John Bell and the Wild Goose Worship Group. GIA Publications, Inc. 7404 S. Mason Ave., Chicago, IL 60638. 800-GIA-1358. www.giamusic.com.

*Rise Up Singing: The group singing songbook*. Conceived, developed and edited by Peter Blood and Anne Patterson. Sing Out Publications, PO Box 5460, Bethlehem, PA 18015-0253. (1-888-SING-OUT) www.singout.org.

*Rounds Galore*. Compiled by Sol Weber. 25-14 37th Street, Astoria, NY 11103-4228.

*Taize Songs for Prayer*. GIA Publications, Inc. 7404 S. Mason Ave., Chicago, IL 60638. 800-GIA-1358. www.giamusic.com.

*The New Century Hymnal*. Pilgrim Press. Cleveland, OH. pilgrim@ucc.org.

*Voices United: The Hymn and Worship Book of the United Church of Canada*. United Church Publishing House. 3250 Bloor Street West, Etobicoke, ON M8X 2Y4 Canada.

*Woman Prayer, Woman Song*. Miriam Therese Winter. Crossroad Publishing Company. NY.

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## Running to Breathe

[5:30 in the a.m.]

No lights, no sounds, no smells . . .  
born again from the darkness.

One breath in,  
One breath out.

[5 minutes into the waking]

Dream memories fading . . . fading . . .  
And gone with a definitive shake of the head.

One breath in,  
One breath out.

[10 minutes later]

My forehead kisses my knee,  
enticing it to hold the stretch for just one more count.

One breath in,  
One breath out.

[5:55 am]

1/8 of the daily recommended water intake  
flows inward, filling up my fingertips.

One breath in,  
One breath out.

[6 hours after midnight]

The shoes are tied, the door is opened,  
there is no rain and life is good.

One breath in,  
One breath out.

[1 minute later]

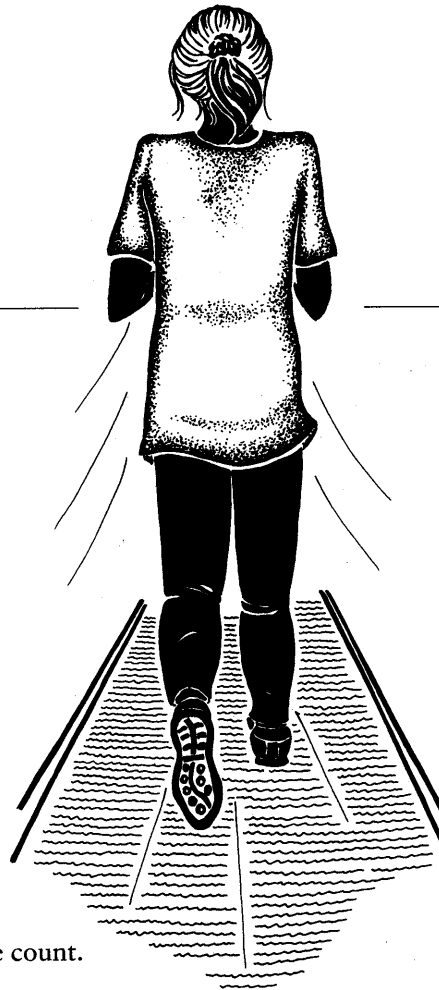
My feet hit the pavement . . .  
in an Anabaptist, nonviolent sort of way.

One breath in,  
One breath out.

[10 minutes into the run]

The rhythm of my breathing and my feet  
become my Morning Song.

One breath in,  
One breath out.



[6:30 a.m.]

There is no world beyond my next step . . .  
life is now.

One breath in,  
One breath out.

[15 minutes later]

The Morning Song is done,  
it's time for the news.

One breath in,  
One breath out.

[Until 5:30 the next morning]

I run so my reality can flesh and pulse  
I run so I can breathe.

One breath in,  
One breath out.

—Kristin Reimer

Kristin Reimer from Waterloo Canada is currently serving as staff  
associate with Mennonite Conciliation Service in Akron, PA.



**"The phrase from Jesus' ministry 'This is my body broken for you' suddenly made a great deal of sense to me."**

by Cynthia A. Lapp

## Death and rebirth

A few years ago, my friend and I were talking about the importance of women friends in our lives. We lamented the lack of significant contact we had because of our busy schedules. How, we wondered, could we find a way to experience the spiritual support and challenge we were missing? As we talked, we realized we were both interested in exploring our spiritual lives through the lens of ritual.

Rather quickly, we assembled a group of five women who committed to meeting once a month. The format has been simple. We rotate leadership. Each month the leader plans a ritual that is born of her spiritual journey during the previous weeks.

The rituals vary. One time we danced to recover the zest in our lives. In addition to the movement, our ritual action that evening was to eat a succulent orange and squeeze the peel into a burning candle. The sparks danced in the flame.

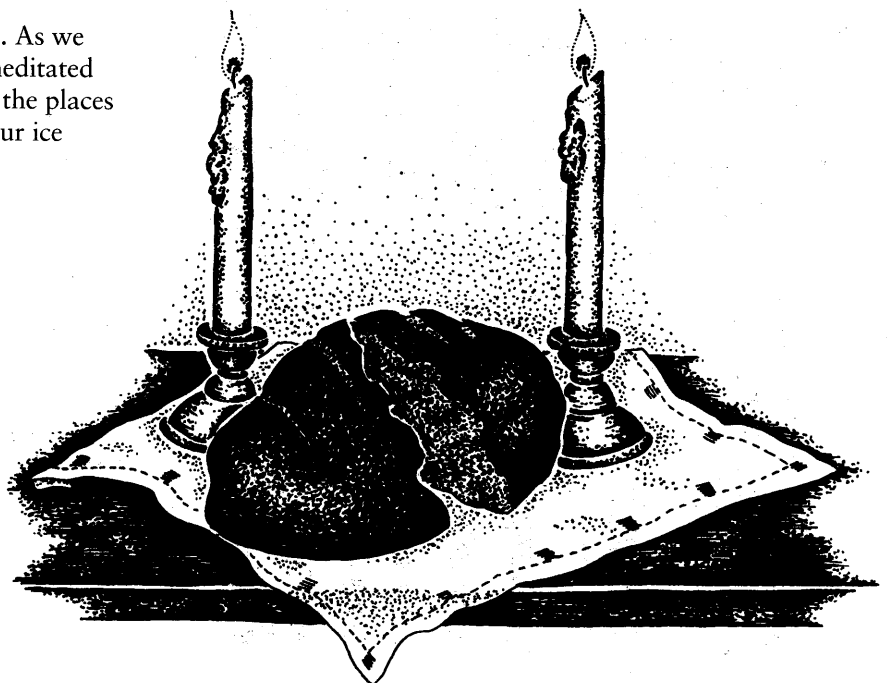
Another celebration marked the spring equinox. As we watched the ice cubes melt in our goblets, we meditated and shared about the frozen places in our lives, the places that were awaiting the "big thaw." We drank our ice water with new commitment and appreciation.

Loss has been a major theme in my life the past two years. My mother, maternal grandmother and a cousin's two-year-old daughter died within six months of each other. A few months later I had an unexpected pregnancy and miscarriage. I was reeling.

When it was my turn to lead the group, I knew I needed to focus on the deaths. The image that I chose for the ritual was dark, tough bread. I lit two small, orb candles, one for my mother and one for the child I will never know. As we watched the candles slowly burn away, I told my story. We wept together as we relived the journey. Each woman had walked the road with me.

We broke the bread, just as the bodies of my mother and the unborn were broken. I would never have chosen for these two to die. Yet in their deaths, I was given food for my own journey. The phrase from Jesus' ministry "This is my body broken for you" suddenly made a great deal of sense to me. Together, we ate the bitter, dark bread—a source of sustenance which is, nevertheless, hard to chew and swallow. We cried. We laughed. We wished that my mother could have been with us.

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"I was connected with my friends, myself, my mother, the unborn and the Holy in a new way."

One woman asked if she could give me a gift. I stood in the center of the room while the others gathered around me. They touched my body, massaging and blessing me. Then they lifted me, heavenward, toward those who were gone. And in that carrying, they were the midwives that brought me into my reclamation of life.

The ritual was not complex in its planning or even in its execution. Rather, it was setting aside a time and place and framing my experience in terms of symbols and action that created what became a truly momentous evening. I was connected with my friends, myself, my mother, the unborn and the Holy in a new way. I chose to live despite death and depression. And I was given new life.



## Book review

*Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work* by bell hooks, Henry Holt and Company, Inc. 1999.

Reviewed by Michelle Armster

Author bell hooks, self described as a writer who is black and female, presents *Remembered Rapture*, a compilation of essays on writing. These career-spanning essays represent a potpourri of entertaining, challenging and stimulating thoughts and ideas on the ritual of writing.

Ms. hooks writes, "the writing process alchemically alters me, leaving me transformed." This moment of rapture, of being transformed, is what seems to provide her with inspiration and direction. She invokes women, especially women of color, to resurrect, reconcile and renew their voices through writing. Writing, hooks says, is not only a way to "claim decolonized subjectivity, it enriches my capacity for self-actualization."

For those who are looking for their voice through the art of writing, *Remembered Rapture* embraces the spiritual desire to "encounter the divine" through writing. This book provides personal accounts of bell hooks' own journey to overcome her fears about writing and to break through the psychological barriers that negated her ability to write.

The boldness of Zora Neale Hurston, the inspiration of Emily Dickinson, the challenge of Toni Cade Bambara and the songs of many other female writers are praised, examined and affirmed. It is wonderful to be reminded of and introduced to more writers who are female, as well as black and female.

Michelle Armster, Dallas, TX, is currently serving as staff associate for urban peacemaking at MCC U.S. She attends Blossom Hill Mennonite Church.



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*There are a plethora of resources available for planning your own rituals. This is only a short listing of books about feminist liturgy as well as resources for creating your own rituals.*

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WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns. Please do not reproduce without permission.

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## News and Verbs

- **Goshen College invites applications for a tenure track appointment in Bible and religion beginning July 2001.** Qualifications: Ph.D. in biblical studies with a concentration in Hebrew Bible (ABD considered); secondary competence in religious studies or theology required. Send letter addressing qualifications, curriculum vitae, undergraduate/graduate transcripts, and three current letters of reference to Provost John Yordy, Goshen College, 1700 Main Street S., Goshen IN 46526. Deadline for applications is Aug. 31 2000. Email: provost@goshen.edu. Telephone: (219) 533-7501. Fax (219) 535-7060. See [www.goshen.edu/employment/br.html](http://www.goshen.edu/employment/br.html) for complete information.

- **Beryl Brubaker was named Provost of Eastern Mennonite University on July 3, 2000 effective immediately.** The Provost is EMU's chief academic officer, overseeing the undergraduate program, four graduate programs and Eastern Mennonite Seminary. Brubaker is also responsible for Hartzler Library, the registrar's office, information systems, academic support services and the Adult Degree Completion program. As senior corporate officer, Brubaker will act on behalf of the president in his absence or as his representative upon request. Brubaker has been a member of the EMU faculty since 1970. She served the past six years as vice president of enrollment management.
- **Please note: There will be no Sept-Oct: *Report*, the next issue published will be the Nov.-Dec. issue, due to staff transition.**

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